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Manufacturing Test for a  
Fault Tolerant Magnetoresistive  
Solid-state Storage Device



This is a continuation-in-part application of co-  
pending U.S. Patent Application No. 09/915,179, filed on  
25 July 2001, which is hereby incorporated by reference.

The present invention relates in general to a  
magnetoresistive solid-state storage device and to a  
method for testing a magnetoresistive solid-state storage  
device. In particular, but not exclusively, the invention  
relates to a method for testing a magnetoresistive solid-  
state storage device that in use will employ error  
correction coding (ECC).

A typical solid-state storage device comprises one or  
more arrays of storage cells for storing data. Existing  
semiconductor technologies provide volatile solid-state  
storage devices suitable for relatively short term storage  
of data, such as dynamic random access memory (DRAM), or  
devices for relatively longer term storage of data such as  
static random access memory (SRAM) or non-volatile flash  
and EEPROM devices. However, many other technologies are  
known or are being developed.

Recently, a magnetoresistive storage device has been  
developed as a new type of non-volatile solid-state  
storage device (see, for example, EP-A-0918334 Hewlett-  
Packard). The magnetoresistive solid-state storage device  
is also known as a magnetic random access memory (MRAM)  
device. MRAM devices have relatively low power consumption  
and relatively fast access times, particularly for data  
write operations, which renders MRAM devices ideally  
suitable for both short term and long term storage  
applications.

A problem arises in that MRAM devices are subject to physical failure, which can result in an unacceptable loss of stored data. Currently available manufacturing techniques for MRAM devices are subject to limitations and  
5 as a result manufacturing yields of commercially acceptable MRAM devices are relatively low. Although better manufacturing techniques are being developed, these tend to increase manufacturing complexity and cost. Hence, it is desired to apply lower cost manufacturing techniques  
10 whilst increasing device yield. Further, it is desired to increase cell density formed on a substrate such as silicon, but as the density increases manufacturing tolerances become increasingly difficult to control, again leading to higher failure rates and lower device yields.  
15 Since the MRAM devices are at a relatively early stage in development, it is desired to allow large scale manufacturing of commercially acceptable devices, whilst tolerating the limitations of current manufacturing techniques.

20

An aim of the present invention is to provide a method for testing a magnetoresistive solid-state storage device. A preferred aim is to provide a test which may be employed at manufacture of a device, preferably prior to storage of  
25 active user data.

According to a first aspect of the present invention there is provided a method for testing a magnetoresistive solid-state storage device, the method comprising the  
30 steps of: accessing a set of magnetoresistive storage cells, the set being arranged in use to store at least one block of ECC encoded data; and determining whether the

accessed set of storage cells is suitable for, in use,  
storing at least one block of ECC encoded data.

Preferably, the method comprises determining whether  
5 original information is expected to be unrecoverable, if a  
block of ECC encoded data were to be stored in the  
accessed set of storage cells. In particular, it is  
determined whether original information is expected to be  
unrecoverable because the probability that original  
10 information is unrecoverable is unacceptably high. In the  
preferred embodiments a probability greater than of the  
order of  $10^{-10}$  to  $10^{-20}$  may be considered as too high. If  
so, remedial action is taken such as discarding that set  
of storage cells such that the set is not available in use  
15 to store a block of ECC encoded data. On the other hand,  
where the probability is acceptable, then use of the set  
of storage cells may continue.

Preferably, the method comprises determining, from  
20 accessing the set of storage cells, one or more failed  
symbols in a block of ECC encoded data that would have  
been affected by a physical failure. Then, suitably, a  
determination is made whether there are more failed  
symbols in the block of ECC encoded data than could be  
25 reliably corrected by error correction decoding the block  
of ECC encoded data. Here, a situation is identified  
where, due to physical failures, ECC decoding the block of  
ECC encoded data would probably fail to correctly recover  
original information. In other words, there is a high  
30 probability (i.e. close to 1) that decoding the block of  
ECC encoded data would not correctly recover original  
information.

The preferred test method comprises two aspects, which can be applied either alone or preferably in combination. The first aspect is parametric-based evaluation of the storage cells of the MRAM device, whilst the second aspect is a logic-based evaluation of the storage cells. These two aspects are each particularly useful in determining different types of physical failures which have been found to affect MRAM devices.

10 In the first aspect concerning parametric-based evaluation, the step of accessing the set of storage cells preferably comprises the steps of obtaining parametric values from the accessed set of storage cells and comparing the obtained parametric values against one or more ranges. For almost all storage cells in the MRAM device, such comparison indicates that, in use, a logical bit value could be successfully derived from that storage cell. However, due to inevitable manufacturing imperfections and other causes, a small proportion of the storage cells in the MRAM device are expected to be affected by physical failures. Conveniently, it has been found that storage cells can be identified as being affected by at least some types of physical failure, by evaluating the obtained parametric values. Preferably, a failed cell is identified where an obtained parametric value falls into a predetermined failure range. In the preferred embodiment, the obtained parametric value represents resistance, and the predetermined failure range represents an abnormally low resistance or an abnormally high resistance, which indicates cells affected by physical failures known as shorted bits and open bits, respectively.

The second aspect employs a logic-based evaluation of the accessed set of storage cells. Here, the step of accessing the set of storage cells preferably comprises the steps of writing test data to the set of storage  
5 cells, reading the test data from the set of storage cells, and comparing the written test data against the read test data. It has been found that this write-read-compare operation advantageously allows storage cells to be identified as being affected by certain types  
10 of physical failure. In the preferred embodiment of the present invention, the logic-based evaluation is particularly useful in determining physical failures known as half-select bits and single failed bits.

15 The determining step of the preferred method preferably comprises determining a failure count, based on the identified failed cells. That is, a failure count is determined based on the failed cells identified by either the parametric-based evaluation or the logic-based  
20 evaluation, and preferably a combination of both. In one example, the failure count can simply represent the number of identified failed cells within the accessed set of storage cells. Preferably, the failure count is based on failed symbols of a block of ECC encoded data that, in  
25 use, would be affected by the identified failed cells. Here, the method suitably comprises determining the position of the identified failed cells within the array of storage cells of the MRAM device, and from this determining the one or more symbols of ECC encoded data  
30 which, in use, would be affected by failed storage cells in those positions.

The determining step preferably further comprises the step of comparing the failure count against a threshold value. As one option, the threshold value represents, for the accessed set of storage cells, the maximum number of failed cells which can be tolerated in use by a block of ECC encoded data stored in those storage cells. Here, the threshold value conveniently represents the situation where there is an unacceptably high probability that original information would not be correctly recovered. Preferably, the threshold value represents the total number of failed symbols which can be reliably corrected by ECC decoding a block of ECC encoded data to be stored in the accessed set of storage cells. As a second option, the threshold value represents a safety margin less than the total number of failed symbols correctable in use by ECC decoding, such as between about 50% to 95% of the total number. In this situation the threshold value is particularly useful in that not all physical failures in MRAM devices can be readily identified by testing, and the threshold value is set such that, given the identified number of failures, it would still be reasonable to perform ECC decoding in use, whilst allowing for an additional number of as yet unidentified failures to affect the block of ECC encoded data to be stored in the accessed set of storage cells. Additionally or alternatively, the threshold value is useful in that new systematic failures may arise as the device ages, and in use the device may be susceptible to random failures.

Conveniently, in use original information is received for storing in the MRAM device in units of a sector, such as 512 bytes. The original information sector is error correction encoded to form one or more blocks of ECC

encoded data. In the preferred embodiment, a linear ECC scheme such as a Reed-Solomon code is employed. Conveniently, each sector of original information is encoded to form a sector of ECC encoded data comprising  
5 four codewords. Each codeword suitably forms the block of ECC encoded data mentioned above.

According to a second aspect of the present invention there is provided a method for controlling a  
10 magnetoresistive solid-state storage device, comprising the steps of: accessing a set of magnetoresistive storage cells, the set being arranged in use to store at least one block of ECC encoded data; comparing parametric values obtained by accessing the set of storage cells against one  
15 or more ranges; identifying failed cells amongst the accessed set of storage cells; forming a failure count based on the identified failed cells; comparing the failure count against a threshold value; and determining whether the accessed set of storage cells is suitable for,  
20 in use, storing at least one block of ECC encoded data.

According to a third aspect of the present invention there is provided a method for controlling a magneto-resistive solid-state storage device, comprising  
25 the steps of: accessing a set of magneto-resistive storage cells, the set being arranged in use to store at least one block of ECC encoded data; writing test data to the accessed set of storage cells; reading test data from the accessed set of storage cells; comparing the  
30 written test data against the read test data, to identify failed cells amongst the accessed set of storage cells; forming a failure count based on the identified failed cells; comparing the failure count against a threshold

value; and determining whether the accessed set of storage cells is suitable for, in use, storing at least one block of ECC encoded data.

5       According to a fourth aspect of the present invention there is provided a method for controlling a magnetoresistive solid-state storage device, comprising the steps of: accessing a set of magnetoresistive storage cells, the set being arranged in use to store at least one  
10   block of ECC encoded data; comparing parametric values obtained by accessing the set of storage cells against one or more ranges and thereby identifying failed cells amongst the accessed set of storage cells; performing  
15   write-read-compare on test data in the accessed set of storage cells, to thereby identify failed cells amongst the accessed set of storage cells; forming a failure count based on the identified failed cells; comparing the failure count against a threshold value; and determining  
20   whether the accessed set of storage cells is suitable for, in use, storing at least one block of ECC encoded data.

      According to a fifth aspect of the present invention there is provided a magnetoresistive solid-state storage device, comprising: at least one array of magnetoresistive  
25   storage cells; an ECC encoding unit for, in use, forming a block of ECC encoded data from a unit of original information; a controller arranged to store the block of ECC encoded data in a set of the storage cells; and a test  
30   unit arranged to access the set of storage cells, and determine whether the accessed set of storage cells is suitable for, in use, storing the block of ECC encoded data.



For a better understanding of the invention, and to show how embodiments of the same may be carried into effect, reference will now be made, by way of example, to the accompanying diagrammatic drawings in which:

5

Figure 1 is a schematic diagram showing a preferred MRAM device including an array of storage cells;

10

Figure 2 shows a preferred logical data structure;

Figure 3 shows a preferred method for testing an MRAM device, using parametric evaluation;

Figure 4 is a graph illustrating a parametric value  
15 obtained from a storage cell of an MRAM device;

Figure 5 shows a preferred method for testing an MRAM device, using logic-based evaluation; and

20 Figure 6 shows a preferred method for testing an MRAM device using a combination of both parametric evaluation and logic-based evaluation.

To assist a complete understanding of the present  
25 invention, an example MRAM device will first be described with reference to Figure 1, including a description of the failure mechanisms found in MRAM devices. The preferred methods for testing such MRAM devices will then be described with reference to Figures 2 to 6.

30

Figure 1 shows a simplified magnetoresistive solid-state storage device 1 comprising an array 10 of storage cells 16. The array 10 is coupled to a controller 20

which, amongst other control elements, includes an ECC coding and decoding unit 22 and a test unit 24. The controller 20 and the array 10 can be formed on a single substrate, or can be arranged separately. If desired, the  
5 test unit 24 is arranged physically separate from the MRAM device 1 and they are coupled together when it is desired to test the MRAM device.

In one preferred embodiment, the array 10 comprises of  
10 the order of 1024 by 1024 storage cells, just a few of which are illustrated. The cells 16 are each formed at an intersection between control lines 12 and 14. In this example control lines 12 are arranged in rows, and control lines 14 are arranged in columns. One row 12 and one or  
15 more columns 14 are selected to access the required storage cell or cells 16 (or conversely one column and several rows, depending upon the orientation of the array). Suitably, the row and column lines are coupled to control circuits 18, which include a plurality of  
20 read/write control circuits. Depending upon the implementation, one read/write control circuit is provided per column, or read/write control circuits are multiplexed or shared between columns. In this example the control lines 12 and 14 are generally orthogonal, but other more  
25 complicated lattice structures are also possible.

In a read operation of the currently preferred MRAM device, a single row line 12 and several column lines 14 (represented by thicker lines in Figure 1) are activated  
30 in the array 10 by the control circuits 18, and a set of data read from those activated cells. This operation is termed a slice. The row in this example is 1024 storage cells long 1 and the accessed storage cells 16 are

separated by a minimum reading distance  $m$ , such as sixty-four cells, to minimise cross-cell interference in the read process. Hence, each slice provides up to  $1/m = 1024/64 = 16$  bits from the accessed array.

5

To provide an MRAM device of a desired storage capacity, preferably a plurality of independently addressable arrays 10 are arranged to form a macro-array. Conveniently, a small plurality of arrays (typically four) are layered to form a stack, and plural stacks are arranged together, such as in a  $16 \times 16$  layout. Preferably, each macro-array has a  $16 \times 18 \times 4$  or  $16 \times 20 \times 4$  layout (expressed as width  $\times$  height  $\times$  stack layers). Optionally, the MRAM device comprises more than one macro-array. In the currently preferred MRAM device only one of the four arrays in each stack can be accessed at any one time. Hence, a slice from a macro-array reads a set of cells from one row of a subset of the plurality of arrays 10, the subset preferably being one array within each stack.

Each storage cell 16 stores one bit of data suitably representing a numerical value and preferably a binary value, i.e. one or zero. Suitably, each storage cell includes two films which assume one of two stable magnetisation orientations, known as parallel and anti-parallel. The magnetisation orientation affects the resistance of the storage cell. When the storage cell 16 is in the anti-parallel state, the resistance is at its highest, and when the magnetic storage cell is in the parallel state, the resistance is at its lowest. Suitably, the anti-parallel state defines a zero logic state, and the parallel state defines a one logic state,

or vice versa. As further background information, EP-A- 0 918 334 (Hewlett-Packard) discloses one example of a magnetoresistive solid-state storage device which is suitable for use in preferred embodiments of the present invention.

Although generally reliable, it has been found that failures can occur which affect the ability of the device to store data reliably in the storage cells 16. Physical failures within an MRAM device can result from many causes including manufacturing imperfections, internal effects such as noise in a read process, environmental effects such as temperature and surrounding electro-magnetic noise, or ageing of the device in use. In general, failures can be classified as either systematic failures or random failures. Systematic failures consistently affect a particular storage cell or a particular group of storage cells. Random failures occur transiently and are not consistently repeatable. Typically, systematic failures arise as a result of manufacturing imperfections and ageing, whilst random failures occur in response to internal effects and to external environmental affects.

Failures are highly undesirable and mean that at least some storage cells in the device cannot be written to or read from reliably. A cell affected by a failure can become unreadable, in which case no logical value can be read from the cell, or can become unreliable, in which case the logical value read from the cell is not necessarily the same as the value written to the cell (e.g. a "1" is written but a "0" is read). The storage capacity and reliability of the device can be severely

affected and in the worst case the entire device becomes unusable.

Failure mechanisms take many forms, and the following  
5 examples are amongst those identified:

1. Shorted bits - where the resistance of the storage  
cell is much lower than expected. Shorted bits tend  
to affect all storage cells lying in the same row and  
10 the same column.
2. Open bits - where the resistance of the storage cell  
is much higher than expected. Open bit failures can,  
but do not always, affect all storage cells lying in  
15 the same row or column, or both.
3. Half-select bits - where writing to a storage cell in  
a particular row or column causes another storage cell  
in the same row or column to change state. A cell  
20 which is vulnerable to half select will therefore  
possibly change state in response to a write access to  
any storage cell in the same row or column, resulting  
in unreliable stored data.
- 25 4. Single failed bits - where a particular storage cell  
fails (e.g. is stuck always as a "0"), but does not  
affect other storage cells and is not affected by  
activity in other storage cells.

30 These four example failure mechanisms are each  
systematic, in that the same storage cell or cells are  
consistently affected. Where the failure mechanism affects  
only one cell, this can be termed an isolated failure.

Where the failure mechanism affects a group of cells, this can be termed a grouped failure.

Whilst the storage cells of the MRAM device can be  
5 used to store data according to any suitable logical  
layout, data is preferably organised into basic data units  
(e.g. bytes) which in turn are grouped into larger logical  
data units (e.g. sectors). A physical failure, and in  
particular a grouped failure affecting many cells, can  
10 affect many bytes and possibly many sectors. It has been  
found that keeping information about logical units such as  
bytes affected by physical failures is not efficient, due  
to the quantity of data involved. That is, attempts to  
produce a list of all such logical units rendered unusable  
15 due to at least one physical failure, tend to generate a  
quantity of management data which is too large to handle  
efficiently. Further, depending on how the data is  
organised on the device, a single physical failure can  
potentially affect a large number of logical data units,  
20 such that avoiding use of all bytes, sectors or other  
units affected by a failure substantially reduces the  
storage capacity of the device. For example, a grouped  
failure such as a shorted bit failure in just one storage  
cell affects many other storage cells, which lie in the  
25 same row or the same column. Thus, a single shorted bit  
failure can affect 1023 other cells lying in the same row,  
and 1023 cells lying in the same column - a total of 2027  
affected cells. These 2027 affected cells may form part  
of many bytes, and many sectors, each of which would be  
30 rendered unusable by the single grouped failure.

Some improvements have been made in manufacturing  
processes and device construction to reduce the number of

manufacturing failures and improve device longevity, but this usually involves increased manufacturing costs and complexity, and reduced device yields. Hence, techniques are being developed which respond to failures and avoid future loss of data. One example technique is the use of sparing. A row identified as containing failures is made redundant (spared) and replaced by one of a set of unused additional spare rows, and similarly for columns. However, either a physical replacement is required (i.e. routing connections from the failed row or column to instead reach the spare row or column), or else additional control overhead is required to map logical addresses to physical row and column lines. Only a limited sparing capacity can be provided, since enlarging the device to include spare rows and columns reduces device density for a fixed area of substrate and increases manufacturing complexity. Therefore, where failures are relatively common, sparing is unable to cope leading to possible loss of data. Also, sparing is not useful in handling random failures, and involves additional management overhead to determine deployment of sparing capacity.

The MRAM devices of the preferred embodiments of the present invention in use employ error correction coding to provide a device which is error tolerant, preferably to tolerate and recover from both random failures and systematic failures. Typically, error correction coding involves receiving original information which it is desired to store and forming encoded data which allows errors to be identified and ideally corrected. The encoded data is stored in the solid-state storage device. At read time, the original information is recovered by error correction decoding the encoded stored data. A wide

range of error correction coding (ECC) schemes are available and can be employed alone or in combination. Suitable ECC schemes include both schemes with single-bit symbols (e.g. BCH) and schemes with multiple-bit symbols (e.g. Reed-Solomon).

As general background information concerning error correction coding, reference is made to the following publication: W.W. Peterson and E.J. Weldon, Jr., "Error-Correcting Codes", 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 12<sup>th</sup> printing, 1994, MIT Press, Cambridge MA.

A more specific reference concerning Reed-Solomon codes used in the preferred embodiments of the present invention is: "Reed-Solomon Codes and their Applications", ED. S.B. Wicker and V.K. Bhargava, IEEE Press, New York, 1994.

Figure 2 shows an example logical data structure used when storing active data in the MRAM device 10. Original information 200 is received in predetermined units such as a sector comprising 512 bytes. Error correction coding is performed to produce a block of encoded data 202, in this case an encoded sector. The encoded sector 202 comprises a plurality of symbols 206 which can be a single bit (e.g. a BCH code with single-bit symbols) or can comprise multiple bits (e.g. a Reed-Solomon code using multi-bit symbols). In the preferred Reed-Solomon encoding scheme, each symbol 206 conveniently comprises eight bits. As shown in Figure 2, the encoded sector 202 comprises four codewords 204, each comprising of the order of 144 to 160 symbols. The eight bits corresponding to each symbol are conveniently stored in eight storage cells 16. A physical failure



which affects any of these eight storage cells can result in one or more of the bits being unreliable (i.e. the wrong value is read) or unreadable (i.e. no value can be obtained), giving a failed symbol.

5

Error correction decoding the encoded data 202 allows failed symbols 206 to be identified and corrected. The preferred Reed-Solomon scheme is an example of a linear error correcting code, which mathematically identifies and  
 10 corrects completely up to a predetermined maximum number of failed symbols 206, depending upon the power of the code. For example, a [160,128,33] Reed-Solomon code producing codewords having one hundred and sixty 8-bit symbols corresponding to one hundred and twenty-eight  
 15 original information bytes and a minimum distance of thirty-three symbols can locate and correct up to sixteen symbol errors. Suitably, the ECC scheme employed is selected with a power sufficient to recover original information 200 from the encoded data 202 in substantially  
 20 all cases. Very rarely, a block of encoded data 202 is encountered which is affected by so many failures that the original information 200 is unrecoverable. Also, even more very rarely the failures result in a mis-correct, where information recovered from the encoded data 202 is  
 25 not equivalent to the original information 200. Even though the recovered information does not correspond to the original information, a mis-correct is not readily determined.

30 In the current MRAM devices, grouped failures tend to affect a large group of storage cells, lying in the same row or column. This provides an environment which is unlike prior storage devices. The preferred embodiments

of the present invention employ an ECC scheme with multi-bit symbols. Where manufacturing processes and device design change over time, it may become more appropriate to organise storage locations expecting bit-based errors and  
5 then apply an ECC scheme using single-bit symbols, and at least some of the following embodiments can be applied to single-bit symbols.

Figure 3 shows a preferred method for testing the MRAM  
10 device 1, using parametric evaluation.

In step 301 a set of storage cells are accessed, preferably in a set of read operations. The accessed set of storage cells correspond to a set of cells which, in  
15 use, would be used to store a block of ECC encoded data such as an encoded sector 202 or a codeword 204. The accessed set of storage cells represents a sufficient number of storage cells for the following steps to be performed, and any suitable set of storage cells can be  
20 accessed. In the currently preferred embodiments, it is convenient for the accessed set of storage cells to represent a single codeword, or an integer number of codewords. In the preferred ECC coding scheme each codeword 204 is decoded in isolation, and the results from  
25 ECC decoding plural codewords (in this case four codewords) provides ECC decoded data corresponding to an original information sector 200.

Step 302 comprises obtaining a plurality of parametric  
30 values associated with the accessed set of storage cells. Suitably, a read voltage is applied along the row and column control lines 12, 14 causing a sense current to flow through selected storage cells 16, which have a

resistance determined by parallel or anti-parallel alignment of the two magnetic films. The resistance of a particular cell is determined according to a phenomenon known as spin tunnelling and the cells are often referred  
5 to as magnetic tunnel junction storage cells. The condition of the storage cell is determined by measuring the sense current (proportional to resistance) or a related parameter such as response time to discharge a known capacitance.

10

Step 303 comprises comparing the obtained parametric values to one or more predicted ranges. The comparison of step 303, in almost all cases, allows a logical value (e.g. one or zero) to be established for each cell.  
15 However, the comparison also conveniently allows storage cells affected by at least some forms of physical failure to be identified. For example, it has been determined that a shorted bit failure leads to a very low resistance value in all cells of a particular row and a particular  
20 column. Also, open-bit failures can cause a very high resistance value for all cells of a particular row and column. By comparing the obtained parametric values against predicted ranges, cells affected by failures such as shorted-bit and open-bit failures can be identified  
25 with a high degree of certainty.

Figure 4 is a graph as an illustrative example of the probability (p) that a particular cell will have a certain parametric value, in this case resistance (r),  
30 corresponding to a logical "0" in the left-hand curve, or a logical "1" in the right-hand curve. As an arbitrary scale, probability has been given between 0 and 1, whilst resistance is plotted between 0 and 100%. The resistance

scale has been divided into five ranges. In range 401, the resistance value is very low and the predicted range represents a shorted-bit failure with a reasonable degree of certainty. Range 402 represents a low resistance value within expected boundaries, which in this example is determined as equivalent to a logical "0". Range 403 represents a medium resistance value where a logical value cannot be ascertained with any degree of certainty. Range 404 is a high resistance range representing a logical "1". Range 405 is a very high resistance value where an open-bit failure can be predicted with a high degree of certainty. The ranges shown in Figure 4 are purely for illustration, and many other possibilities are available depending upon the physical construction of the MRAM device 1, the manner in which the storage cells are accessed, and the parametric values obtained. The range or ranges are suitably calibrated depending, for example, on environmental factors such as temperature, factors affecting a particular cell or cells and their position within the array, or the nature of the cells themselves and the type of access employed.

Referring again to Figure 3, step 304 comprises counting a number of physical failures, preferably on the basis of failed cells identified in the comparison of step 303. Suitably, the count of parametric failures in step 304 is performed on the basis of the number of symbols (each containing one or more bits) which would, in use, be affected by the identified failed cells.

30

Step 305 comprises comparing the number of parametric failures, i.e. the number of failed symbols identified by parametric testing, against a predetermined threshold

value. The number of physical failures can be represented in any suitable form. Depending upon the nature of the ECC scheme employed, some types of failure can be weighted differently to other types of failure. Since, in use, the data to be stored in the storage cells represents encoded data, it is expected that ECC decoding will not be able reliably to correctly recover the original data, where the number of parametric failures is greater than the maximum power of the ECC scheme. Hence, the threshold value is suitably selected to represent a value which is equal to or less than the maximum number of failures which the ECC scheme employed is able to correct. Preferably, the threshold value in step 305 is selected to be substantially less than the maximum power of the ECC decoding scheme, suitably of the order of 50% to 95% of the maximum power. In a particular preferred embodiment the threshold value in step 305 is selected to represent about 50% to 75% and suitably about 60% of the maximum power of the employed ECC scheme. Preferably, the step 305 comprises determining the number of parametric failures to be greater than the threshold value, such that, in use, performing ECC decoding is expected (with a sufficiently high probability) not to be able to correctly recover information from the encoded data. That is, where the number of parametric failures is greater than the threshold value, there is a greater than acceptable probability that information is unrecoverable from the encoded data, or that a miscorrection will occur.

Step 306 comprises determining whether or not to continue use of the set of cells corresponding to the accessed block of data, in view of the number of parametric failures which have been identified. If

desired, remedial action can be taken. Such remedial action may take any suitable form, to manage future activity in the storage cells 16. As one example, the set of storage cells 16 corresponding to a codeword 204 or to a complete encoded sector 202 are identified and discarded, in order to avoid possible loss of data in future. In the currently preferred embodiments it is most convenient to use or discard sets of storage cells corresponding to an encoded sector 202, although greater or lesser granularity can be applied as desired. In the preferred embodiment, each sector comprises four codewords, and a sector is made redundant where any one of its four codewords contains a number of failures which is greater than the threshold value of step 305.

15

The test method of Figure 3 is particularly useful as a test procedure immediately following manufacture of the device, or at installation, or at power up, or at any convenient time subsequently. In one example, the test procedure of Figure 3 is performed by writing a test set of data to the device and then reading from the device, or by any other suitable parametric testing. In particular, it is useful to apply the method of Figure 3 to identify areas of the MRAM device which are severely affected by systematic errors caused by manufacturing imperfections, and remedial action can then be taken before the device is put into active use storing variable user data.

The parametric evaluation of Figure 3 is particularly useful in determining shorted-bit and/or open-bit failures in MRAM devices. A systematic failure, such as a half select or some forms of isolated bit failure, is not so easily detectable using parametric tests. Even so, by

selecting an appropriate threshold value, the test method is able to provide a practical device which is able to take advantage of the considerable benefits offered by the new MRAM technology whilst minimising the limitations of current available manufacturing techniques.

A second preferred test method will now be described with reference to Figure 5, using logic-based evaluation.

10 In step 501, test data is written to a selected set of storage cells 16. This set suitably represents the same set as used for parametric evaluation in the method of Figure 3. The test data may take any suitable form, according to any suitable logical structure. For example, 15 the test data may, or may not, include ECC encoded data.

In step 502, the test data is read from the set of storage cells.

20 In step 503, the written test data and the read test data are compared to identify suspected failed cells. If desired, steps 501 and 502 can be repeated one or more times, to increase confidence that failed cells have been correctly identified. Many different types of failures 25 can be identified. By selecting appropriate test data, failed cells affected by shorted-bit and/or open-bit failures can be identified, but the method is particularly useful in identifying cells affected by half-select failures or single-bit failures.

30 Step 504 comprises forming a count of logically-identified failures. Similar to step 304, this count is suitably performed on the basis of the number of

symbols 206 (each containing one or more bits) which would, in use, be affected by the identified failed cells.

5 Step 505 comprises comparing the failure count against a predetermined threshold value. This comparison is preferably similar to the comparison performed in the parametric evaluation. The threshold value is suitably selected to represent a value which is equal to or less than the maximum number of failures which the ECC scheme  
10 to be employed in use is able to correct. In one embodiment, the threshold value is selected to be of the order of 50% to 95% of this maximum power.

15 Step 506 comprises determining whether or not to continue use of the set of cells, in view of the failure count based on logically identified failed cells. Remedial action can be taken if desired, as discussed for step 306.

20 Figure 6 shows a preferred test method combining both parametric evaluation and logical evaluation.

Step 601 comprises accessing a set of storage cells. In step 602, failed cells are identified with parametric  
25 evaluation as discussed above in the method of Figure 3. In step 603, failed cells, ideally with different types of physical failures, are identified with logical evaluation as discussed in Figure 5. The logical failures and parametric failures are counted in step 604, and this  
30 failure count compared against a threshold in step 605. At step 606, a decision is made whether to continue with active use of the accessed storage cells. Ideally, logical evaluation and parametric evaluation are combined



in order identify failed cells from a greater range of physical failures than is possible with either method alone.

- 5       The MRAM device described herein is ideally suited for use in place of any prior solid-state storage device. In particular, the MRAM device is ideally suited both for use as a short-term storage device (e.g. cache memory) or a longer-term storage device (e.g. a solid-state hard disk).
- 10   An MRAM device can be employed for both short term storage and longer term storage within a single apparatus, such as a computing platform.

- 15       A magnetoresistive solid-state storage device and a method for testing such a device have been described. Advantageously, the storage device is able to tolerate a relatively large number of errors, including both systematic failures and transient failures, whilst successfully remaining in operation with no loss of
- 20   original data. Simpler and lower cost manufacturing techniques are employed and/or device yield and device density are increased. As manufacturing processes improve, overhead of the employed ECC scheme can be reduced. However, error correction coding and decoding allows
- 25   blocks of data, e.g. sectors or codewords, to remain in use, where otherwise the whole block must be discarded if only one failure occurs. Therefore, the preferred embodiments of the present invention avoid large scale discarding of logical blocks and reduce or even eliminate
- 30   completely the need for inefficient control methods such as large-scale data mapping management or physical sparing.